

Diversity has much to offer

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By Bill Hardiman

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It had been a wonderful evening. My wife and I had just attended one of the gala events at the Grand Center. The speaker had been inspiring, the cause noble, and the atmosphere truly uplifting.

Because it was a formal "black-tie" event, hundreds of women expressed their individuality by donning beautiful gowns and dresses. My wife, Clova, looked exceptionally good. Like the other men attending the affair, I wore my tuxedo. Although I'm sure we all looked nice, we all seemed to look the same.

As hundreds of people exited the Grand Center, Clova and I stopped to talk with a few friends. A well-dressed couple approached us. The stylish, young, upper-middle-class-looking woman politely but firmly interrupted our conversation with "Excuse me." I turned around, and looked at her with a friendly smile and responded, "Yes?"

"We need some water," she stated.

"Oh, you thought I worked here. I am a guest as well," I replied.

"Oh," she blushed. "How was I to know? I assumed you worked here. We've got to find a waiter," she said as she rushed off.

The only black man

A moment of awkwardness chased away the excitement we had just been feeling. My friend seemed to be more offended than I was, perhaps because I'm used to people assuming. Out of hundreds of men in look-alike tuxedos, she had picked me out, the only black man, and assumed.

Assumptions like that have not been unusual for me. These unpleasant assumptions have taken many forms, ranging from being stopped by law enforcement officers for driving in the wrong area, to being followed by sales personnel in a department store. Yet these irritations pale in comparison to people still being denied jobs or promotions or other economic opportunities because of the color of their skin.

The assumption that I was an employee at the event instead of a guest is not the issue. Clova and I have gotten to know some of the wait staff, and we consider them friends. That the assumption was based upon my skin color, however, is the issue.

Racial prejudice and institutional racism have been problems in America from its inception. We've tried to eliminate institutional racism with laws and policies, and we've made real progress. Because of these achievements, there is a sentiment that says enough has been done. However, here in Michigan, we've seen firsthand how the discussion on race continues and has the potential to divide us.

Note the reaction to the United States Supreme Court decision on the two University of Michigan admissions lawsuits. A wide range of business and community leaders sided with the university. The decisions touched off a negative reaction elsewhere and, with it, the beginning of a ballot drive that could place the affirmative action question before the voters.

The value of diversity

People of diverse races bring unique valuable experiences and qualities that help us live in a racially diverse society. I support a policy that allows us to work toward racial diversity in our universities, and our businesses and relationships as well.

As long as our universities can base admissions on factors such as home residence, "legacy" admissions because of a relative's earlier attendance, income level or athletic talent, they should be able to take the race of a prospective student into account. Surely, universities should have the ability to admit students to create an educational environment reflective of society as a whole.

Regardless of our beliefs about public issues like admissions policies or affirmative action, our most important discussion is within our personal lives and our own hearts. I ask each one of us to search his or her own heart. Even with good intentions, we can easily slip into hasty pre-judging of others.

This also was brought home to me recently. While out in public, I encountered a young man. His hair, plaid shirt and initial manner all communicated to me "redneck." It was easy for me to imagine his truck with a confederate flag on the back, and a rifle on the seat. Instead, his warm greeting and conversation dispelled this negative stereotype, and I later reflected that he was the friendliest person I had met all day. I was embarrassed by my prejudice. I had pre-judged him by his outward appearance.

Scripture tells us that "man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." Heaven is described with mankind from "every tribe and language and people and nation." God isn't color blind, but He sure likes variety.

The greater Grand Rapids area is increasingly racially diverse. However, most of us live in homogeneous worlds, working in homogeneous environments, frequenting homogeneous stores or places of entertainment and attending homogeneous places of worship.

I believe that building strong personal relationships helps eliminate the stereotypical myths we have about one another. So I encourage you: Get to know someone from a different race through your job, neighborhood, a volunteer organization or place of worship.

This doesn't mean forcing a relationship with someone of objectionable behavior or whose values conflict with your own. I am suggesting that you will find there are people of different races and ethnic backgrounds worth knowing. They will help expand the boundaries of your mind and emotions, and help you be a better member of this community.

My wife Clova and I have been blessed with many friends from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Our lives are enriched by their stories and the moral character of their lives.

Like the Hispanic couple working long hours at less-than-glamorous jobs to make money to support their immediate as well as their extended families. They teach us the meaning of "todo para la familia" -- everything for the family.

Like the Caucasian entrepreneur with deep love for God, his wife and family and country and community. Despite his own physical challenges, he makes substantial contributions to our community and tender and caring sacrifices for his beautiful, but ailing, wife. I've never heard a complaint from his mouth, only praise and thanksgiving to God.

Like the African-American husband and father of 13 children, working hard to support his family throughout his life. His legacy was such that if you asked any of his children whom he loved the most, there would be only one answer: his wife. If you asked who was next, you would get 13 different answers because this man had enough love to make each child feel as if he or she were loved the most.

Like our Asian-American friend whose family life reflects genuine love and commitment. Before considering a family of his own, he worked hard to insure his parents' financial future and provide for his sister's college education. His family owns and operates a business in a very competitive environment, but because of their religious convictions, it is closed on Sundays.

Like the Caucasian man who is one of my closest friends. Upon hearing of an ailing longtime friend and mentor, he quietly and joyfully donated an organ. Looking past the

pain and inconvenience of the transplant, my friend was thankful for the opportunity to give to his mentor, and help him invest in other lives.

Finally, like my own mother-in-law, an African-American and Native-American raising three girls alone in the tough inner city of Nashville, Tenn. Although her education was limited, she had a strong faith in God, an appreciation for education and a desire for her daughters to have better lives than her own. She gave reading assignments to them before leaving for a long day of domestic work. She encouraged her daughters and demanded their best in school. My mother-in-law passed away a few years ago, but she left behind a legacy. All three daughters have college degrees, families of their own and are contributing members of their communities.

These are only a few of the stories of the lives from our diverse group of friends. Each person has a different history, a different culture, but all are role models and reveal values that instruct and inspire. Because of the historic distance between the races, and the ongoing gaps in understanding, we need to work harder to cross these old lines, and find those inspiring stories which are there beyond our own racial groups.

I call on people of goodwill to expand their circles of friends and include someone from a different race. Develop a deep, solid, friendship. If you have one, why not another and another?

Then perhaps, if you approach an African-American man at a black-tie function, and ask for water, he'll give it to you, not as an employee, but as a friend.

About the Essayist

State Sen. Bill Hardiman has emerged as a spokesman for issues of race because of his unique standing: the only black Republican in the 148-member Michigan Legislature.

"Anything of a political nature dealing with race, the media finds me very quickly," Hardiman said. "I try to say what I think is right."

Hardiman, 56, was encouraging diversity long before his 2002 election to the state Senate. He served as mayor of Kentwood for 10 years starting in 1993 and was a member of the Kentwood City Commission since 1987.

While serving as mayor, Hardiman began his other great passion: the promotion of healthy marriages. He was one of the founders of a group that became known as Healthy Marriages Grand Rapids.

"I still have a goal to build strong communities," Hardiman said. "Marriages are a part of that."

He said caring about a sense of community is what pushed him into politics. Like

marriage, diversity is an important part of community, Hardiman said.

"I'm interested in people coming together and recognizing that we have more that draws us together, celebrating some of the cultural and racial differences that are very positive," he said.

Born in Pontiac, Hardiman grew up in the Grand Rapids area, graduating from Grand Rapids Community College, Grand Valley State University and Western Michigan University with a master's degree in public administration. He has been active in his church, Grand Rapids First Assembly of God, and on many area committees and boards.

He previously served as vice president of rehabilitation at Goodwill Industries, director of counseling and residential services with Hope Rehabilitation Network Inc., and as a contract administrator-planner with Kent County Community Mental Health.

He lives in Kentwood with Clova Hardiman, his wife of three decades.

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